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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000743

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DEPT FOR SECRETARY OF STATE RICE FROM AF A/S NEWMAN AND  
AMBASSADOR-AT-LARGE PROSPER

DEPT FOR S/ES NICK BURNS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/12/2015

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [SU](#) [NI](#) [LI](#)

SUBJECT: OBASANJO AND CHARLES TAYLOR

Classified by Ambassador John Campbell for Reasons 1.4 b.  
and d.

1. (S) Summary: In our May 13 meeting, President Obasanjo reiterated his familiar arguments against turning Taylor over to the Special Court in Sierra Leone. He showed no sense of urgency and made it clear that he did not want to engage. However, he agreed on the importance of continued dialogue. He designated the Nigerian National Security Advisor Aliyu Mohammed, Nigeria's Solicitor General Professor Ignatius Ayua, and Acting MFA Permanent Secretary Amb. O.A. Ashiru as the Nigeria team to discuss with us how to go forward. We recommend that the Department immediately invite the three to come to Washington to continue the discussion. With respect to a possible UN Security Council Resolution extending UNMIL authority to arrest Taylor should he appear in Liberia, Obasanjo said that further discussions should be with the Nigerian Permanent Representative in New York. See paragraph 6 for our comments and recommendations. Obasanjo also promised to do what he could to press Konare on going to NATO concerning Darfur. End Summary.

2. (S) With the American Ambassador in Abuja, we met with Obasanjo the morning of May 13 at the Presidency. On his side were his Chief of Staff, the MFA Director General, and various other Presidency staff. Amiable throughout, Obasanjo opened by expressing surprise that we had come to Abuja so soon after he had been in Washington. We replied that building on Obasanjo's meetings in Washington, the President and the Secretary had sent us to Abuja to follow up on Charles Taylor. We began with a brief discussion about Konare's possible appearance at NATO in the coming week concerning Darfur. Obasanjo promised to do what he could to ensure that Konare lived up to his agreement to go.

3. (S) When the conversation turned to Charles Taylor, we recalled Obasanjo's meetings in Washington where he agreed to appoint interlocutors with whom we could explore the way forward. We asked for the names of those interlocutors and also for his thinking about the concepts that could govern future conversations. Obasanjo repeated his usual themes: it had been in response to the international community, especially ECOWAS and the United States, that he had agreed to accept Charles Taylor. He noted that Taylor had been escorted to Nigeria by Mbeki and Chissano. He said that his agreement to accept Taylor had never been time limited. He also said that West Africa in general, and Nigeria in particular, are being badly treated by the rest of the international community over Taylor; absent Nigeria's hosting of Taylor, the bloodshed in Liberia would have continued. He said that were he to turn over Charles Taylor to the Special Court in Sierra Leone, his own credibility would be undermined with respect his West African diplomacy and Nigeria's peacekeeping efforts, both of which are interests shared with the U.S. He cited as a specific example the meeting he is hosting in the coming week of all of the Togolese factions, where he needs to be seen as a man of his word.

4. (S) Two things could change the situation, Obasanjo continued. Should Charles Taylor be guilty of crimes while he has been in Nigeria, the former head of state would have to go; and if a democratically elected Liberia government should ask him to turn over Charles Taylor, he would respond positively. Obasanjo was dismissive of the intelligence he had seen about Taylor's alleged crimes while in Nigeria: "its wishy-washy." Obasanjo made it clear that should we determine it was in the best interests to keep Taylor out of Liberia, even after democratic elections, Taylor could stay in Nigeria indefinitely.

5. (S) When we pressed for the names of his team with whom we could discuss ways of moving forward, Obasanjo said we need a small team on both sides. Apparently on the spot, he designated the National Security Advisor, Aliyu Mohammed, as chair, to be joined by the Solicitor General and the Acting MFA Permanent Secretary with ambassadorial rank. "That way," Obasanjo continued, "legal experts can

talk to legal experts, diplomats can talk to diplomats, and security people can talk to security people. And soon it will be October" (the latter a reference to the date of the upcoming Liberia elections). He offered to send his team to Washington for the next round of discussions. Any agreement between the two teams, Obasanjo continued, would require consultations, perhaps approval from ECOWAS and the AU.

16. (S) We raised the possibility of a Security Council resolution expanding UNMIL's authority to arrest Taylor should he appear in Liberia. Obasanjo dismissed such a resolution as misplaced humor: it would practically guarantee that Taylor remains in Nigeria. We asked with whom we could discuss a draft text. His response: the Nigerian Permanent Representative in New York.

17. (S) Comments and recommendations: Obasanjo will clearly delay as long as possible any movement on Charles Taylor, though he does not want to offend the President and the Secretary of State. He resents a possible Security Council resolution, and clearly will not dialogue with us about a text. Obasanjo betrayed no willingness to contemplate turning Taylor over to the Special Court in Sierra Leone. For him, the options are to keep Taylor in Nigeria or send him elsewhere at the request of democratically elected government in Monrovia. For us, at this time, there are three options:

A) Push Obasanjo on Charles Taylor, and if Obasanjo does not move we agree to move forward with out his consent on a UNSC resolution.

B) Respect Obasanjo's position, but allow the Danish effort to move forward with their staff negotiating in new your with the Nigerians.

C) Acquiesce.

18. (S) In deciding which option to select, we must keep in mind the potential impact on a wide range of areas where we cooperate with Nigeria. Absent strong pressure that could affect those other interests, Obasanjo will do little or nothing now. With the exception of Aliyu Mohammed, his "team" is not close to the center of power in Abuja, nor is the Nigeria Permanent Representative in New York. Nevertheless, we should continue to negotiate in good faith. We recommend an early letter of invitation from the Department to Aliyu Mohammed, as chairman of the Nigerian team, to bring the team to Washington for continued talks. With respect to a possible Danish-sponsored UN Security Council resolution, we should avoid negotiating on Nigeria's behalf. Instead, we should urge sponsors of any such resolution to approach the Nigerian Permanent Representative in New York or the Presidency in Abuja.  
CAMPBELL